
From Common Good to Counter-Hegemony: Rethinking Civil Society in Global Climate Governance (Karnataka's Perspective)

Dr. Chaitra C

Head & Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science

Government College for Women, Kolar, Karnataka 563101

chaitra7788@gmail.com

Abstract

Global climate governance is increasingly shaped not only by states but also by civil society organisations, social movements, scientific communities, Indigenous peoples, business actors, youth groups, professional associations and other non-Party stakeholders. Yet civil society is neither a homogeneous nor politically neutral sphere. This paper develops a political-theoretical framework for analysing civil society in global climate governance by bringing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G. W. F. Hegel and Antonio Gramsci into a connected analytical sequence. Rousseau illuminates the normative problem of the common good and the tension between particular interests and collective will; Hegel conceptualises civil society as a sphere of particularity, economic interdependence and competing interests requiring institutional mediation; and Gramsci identifies civil society as a terrain of hegemony, consent and counter-hegemonic struggle. The paper asks: who defines the “common good” in global climate governance, how are competing interests mediated, and through what forms of power do particular understandings of development become dominant? The framework is applied to four contemporary arenas of climate politics—climate finance, loss and damage, just transition and the principle of equity/common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC)—and is extended to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 13. India is used as an illustrative case because its climate diplomacy seeks to reconcile development, poverty eradication, energy security, equity and global climate responsibility. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative conceptual analysis and theory-informed document analysis of selected climate-governance texts. The paper argues that civil society should be understood simultaneously as a vehicle for articulating collective interests, a mechanism for mediating social conflicts and a contested arena of power. The proposed Common Good–Mediation–Hegemony framework offers a bridge between political theory and contemporary climate governance and provides a basis for future empirical research. These are analysed with Karnataka's perspective.

Keywords: Civil society; Rousseau; Hegel; Gramsci; climate governance; climate negotiations; climate justice; climate finance; just transition; sustainable development; SDG 13; India; hegemony.

1. Introduction

Climate change has become one of the defining political problems of the twenty-first century. Although its physical dimensions are scientific, its causes, consequences and solutions are deeply political. Questions of responsibility, development, finance, technology, energy, adaptation, loss and damage and the distribution of transition costs are negotiated among actors with highly unequal capacities and interests. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has emphasised that climate change has already produced widespread adverse impacts and that vulnerability is unevenly distributed across regions and social groups (IPCC, 2023).

The international climate regime is formally state-centred, but contemporary climate governance extends well beyond governments. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) recognises the role of non-Party stakeholders and provides avenues for participation by observer organisations and other actors. Civil society organisations contribute research, advocacy and monitoring; social movements mobilise public opinion; Indigenous organisations advance claims concerning land, rights and knowledge; scientists produce authoritative knowledge; businesses and investors influence technological and financial pathways; and local actors increasingly implement climate responses. Climate governance is therefore better understood as a multi-actor political field rather than a purely interstate process.

The growing role of civil society raises an important theoretical question: what exactly is civil society, and how should its political role be understood? Treating civil society simply as a benevolent partner of the state overlooks internal inequalities and struggles over representation, resources and influence. A critical understanding requires attention to common interests, competing interests and unequal power. This paper addresses that problem through three influential conceptions of civil society: Rousseau's concern with the common good and the General Will; Hegel's analysis of civil society as the sphere of particular interests and the system of needs; and Gramsci's account of civil society as a terrain in which hegemony and counter-hegemony are produced.

The central argument is that these thinkers can be placed in a productive analytical sequence. Rousseau helps identify the normative problem: what constitutes the common climate good? Hegel helps identify the institutional problem: how can competing economic, social and political interests be mediated? Gramsci identifies the power problem: who possesses the capacity to define the common good and make a particular conception of development appear natural or universal? Together, these questions provide a framework for analysing contemporary climate negotiations, climate justice and sustainable development.

1.1 Research Problem

Much of the climate-governance literature focuses on international institutions, regime effectiveness, political economy, non-state actors and environmental governance. Parallel scholarship on civil society has examined democracy, social movements, public spheres and hegemony. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a theoretically integrated account connecting classical civil-society theory with the politics of contemporary climate negotiations. The research problem addressed here is therefore how the concepts of common good, institutional mediation and hegemony can be combined to explain civil society's role in constructing, negotiating and contesting global climate priorities.

1.2 Central Research Question

Who defines the “common good” in global climate governance, how are competing interests mediated, and how does civil society participate in and contest that process?

1.3 Sub-Questions

- How do Rousseau, Hegel and Gramsci conceptualise civil society and its relationship with political authority?
- How can their theories illuminate climate finance, loss and damage, just transition and equity/CBDR-RC?
- How do civil-society actors influence climate discourse, participation and accountability?
- How can the framework explain tensions between climate action and sustainable development?
- How does India's climate diplomacy illustrate the relationship between development, equity and global climate responsibility?

1.4 Objectives

- To develop a comparative political-theoretical account of civil society through Rousseau, Hegel and Gramsci.
- To construct the Common Good–Mediation–Hegemony framework for analysing climate governance.
- To apply the framework to selected contemporary climate-negotiation issues.
- To connect civil society theory with SDG 13 and the integrated sustainable-development agenda.
- To examine India as an illustrative case of development–climate–equity tensions.
- To identify institutional and policy measures for more inclusive and equitable civil-society participation.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Civil Society: From Classical Political Theory to Contemporary Approaches

Cohen and Arato (1992) provide a major modern reconstruction of civil society as a differentiated sphere associated with voluntary association, communication, rights and democratic practice. Their work is useful for distinguishing civil society from both the state and the market while recognising its internal complexity.

Keane (1988) traces the historical relationship between civil society, democracy and social power. His work helps situate contemporary civil society within wider debates about the control of political and social power.

Habermas (1989) contributes the idea of a public sphere in which citizens communicate, form public opinion and influence political authority. Although the public sphere is not identical to civil society, it provides a useful complementary perspective on climate communication and deliberation.

Rousseau, Hegel and Gramsci represent three different stages in the conceptual development of the idea. Rousseau foregrounds collective political will and inequality; Hegel systematically locates civil society between family and state; Gramsci turns civil society into a key terrain of ideological leadership and political struggle.

2.2 Climate Governance, Power and Civil Society

Newell (2000) demonstrates the importance of non-state actors and political economy in global climate politics. Bulkeley and Newell (2015) further show that climate governance operates across multiple scales and involves governments, cities, corporations and civil society.

Bernstein (2001) examines legitimacy in global environmental governance, a question that becomes especially important when decisions affect unequal populations and require implementation across political systems.

Ciplet, Roberts and Khan (2015) explicitly foreground power in global climate governance, demonstrating that unequal political and economic capabilities shape negotiations and environmental inequality. This literature provides an important bridge to Gramscian analysis.

Dryzek (2013) highlights competing environmental discourses and therefore supports the argument that climate politics involves struggles over meaning as well as material interests. Dryzek and Pickering (2019) further explore the political implications of the Anthropocene and the institutional challenges of planetary-scale governance.

Newell and Paterson (2010) analyse the political economy of climate capitalism, making visible the relationships among markets, capital, energy and climate governance. This is useful for examining how economic interests influence climate narratives and policy choices.

2.3 Climate Justice, Development and India

Dubash (2019) places India's climate politics within the broader relationship between development and climate change. India's position illustrates how mitigation cannot be separated from poverty eradication, energy access, economic transformation and international equity.

Climate-justice scholarship has increasingly highlighted historical responsibility, differentiated vulnerability, procedural participation and distributive fairness. These concerns resonate with Rousseau's problem of the common good but also expose the limits of universalist claims when historical and material inequalities are ignored.

UN and UNFCCC documents frame sustainable development and climate action as interconnected global objectives. The 2030 Agenda explicitly links economic, social and environmental dimensions, while the Paris Agreement establishes a framework for nationally determined contributions, transparency and collective progress.

2.4 Research Gap

The literature establishes strong separate traditions of civil-society theory, climate governance and climate political economy. However, there is scope for a more integrated conceptual framework that asks three questions simultaneously: what collective objective should guide climate action; how can conflicting interests be institutionally mediated; and how do unequal power relations shape which interpretation becomes dominant? This paper addresses that gap through the Common Good–Mediation–Hegemony framework.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Rousseau: Common Good, Inequality and the General Will

Rousseau's analysis of society is deeply concerned with inequality, dependence and the transformation of social relations through property and comparison. The Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (1755) questions the assumption that social development automatically produces moral progress.

In The Social Contract (1762), Rousseau turns to the problem of legitimate political association. The General Will is directed towards the common interest and cannot simply be equated with the sum of private preferences. Political legitimacy therefore requires a form of collective will that transcends narrow particular interests.

Climate change creates a Rousseauian dilemma. Atmospheric stability is a shared global interest, but states and social groups possess different historical responsibilities, vulnerabilities, capacities and developmental needs. A climate regime based only on bargaining among particular interests may fail to capture a genuinely collective interest.

The Rousseauian contribution to climate analysis is therefore normative. It asks whether concepts such as climate justice, equity, intergenerational responsibility and sustainable development can provide a sufficiently inclusive conception of the global common good.

3.2 Hegel: Civil Society as the Sphere of Particularity and Mediation

Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1821) places civil society between the family and the state. Civil society is the sphere of particularity, economic life, needs, property, division of labour and association. Individuals pursue particular interests but become increasingly interdependent through the system of needs.

Unlike a purely voluntarist conception, Hegel does not expect competing interests simply to disappear. Modern society requires institutions capable of mediating particular interests and connecting them to more universal purposes.

Climate politics closely reflects this problem. Workers, corporations, governments, consumers, farmers, environmental organisations and communities may have conflicting interests in energy, employment, technology and land use. Climate policy therefore requires institutions that reconcile decarbonisation with social protection, economic transformation and developmental needs.

The concept of just transition is particularly Hegelian in this sense: climate transformation must be institutionalised so that its costs and benefits are mediated rather than simply imposed on vulnerable groups.

3.3 Gramsci: Civil Society, Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

Gramsci's account of civil society shifts the analysis from mediation alone to power and consent. Civil society is a major terrain through which social groups exercise cultural and ideological leadership. Hegemony involves the production of consent around particular conceptions of social order.

This perspective is especially valuable in climate politics. Ideas such as 'fossil fuels are necessary for development', 'economic growth must precede environmental protection' or 'technological innovation alone will solve climate change' can operate as forms of common sense. They may reflect material interests while appearing politically neutral.

Counter-hegemonic actors challenge dominant assumptions. Climate movements, Indigenous organisations, youth activists, environmental NGOs, critical scientists and climate-justice networks can introduce alternative narratives such as just transition, energy democracy, climate justice, sustainable lifestyles and community resilience.

However, civil society itself contains unequal power. Corporate associations, wealthy advocacy organisations, professional networks and grassroots groups do not possess equal access to information, finance, media or decision-makers. A Gramscian analysis therefore asks not simply whether civil society participates, but whose voice has greater capacity to become politically authoritative.

3.4 Comparative Framework

Thinker	Core concept	Civil society	Climate question	Analytical implication
Rousseau	General Will / common good	Particular interests must be oriented towards a legitimate common interest	What should constitute the global common climate good?	Normative legitimacy and equity
Hegel	System of needs / mediation	Sphere of economic and social particularity requiring institutional reconciliation	How can competing interests be mediated?	Institutions, negotiation and just transition
Gramsci	Hegemony / counter-hegemony	Terrain of consent, ideology and political struggle	Who defines the climate common sense?	Power, discourse and unequal influence

4. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, conceptual and interpretive research design. It is intended as a theory-informed analysis rather than a statistical study. The primary method is comparative conceptual analysis, supplemented by qualitative document analysis.

Primary theoretical sources comprise Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality and The Social Contract; Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right; and Gramsci's Prison Notebooks. Contemporary

primary documents include the UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, UN 2030 Agenda, selected UNFCCC materials on non-Party stakeholders, IPCC assessment material and India's updated first NDC.

Secondary literature is selected purposively from scholarship on civil society, environmental political theory, climate governance, political economy, legitimacy, climate justice and Indian climate politics. The analytical concepts are common good, particular interests, institutional mediation, hegemony, counter-hegemony, equity and sustainable development.

The document-analysis component focuses on four climate-governance arenas: (i) climate finance; (ii) loss and damage; (iii) just transition; and (iv) equity/CBDR-RC. These are selected because they expose tensions between universal climate objectives and differentiated responsibilities and interests.

Analytical triangulation is used by examining each issue through the three theoretical lenses. The study does not claim to establish causal influence by specific organisations. Rather, it identifies mechanisms through which civil society can articulate collective claims, mediate interests, shape discourse and contest dominant narratives.

The principal limitation is the conceptual nature of the paper. Future research can operationalise the framework through interviews, process tracing, discourse analysis of COP submissions and comparative case studies.

5. Civil Society and Contemporary Climate Negotiations

5.1 Climate Finance: Who Pays and Who Decides?

Climate finance provides a particularly clear illustration of the three perspectives. The Rousseauian question concerns fairness in collective responsibility: if climate stability is a common good, how should financial burdens be distributed among states with different historical contributions and capacities? The Hegelian question concerns institutional mediation: through what mechanisms can donor, recipient, private-sector and community interests be reconciled? The Gramscian question concerns power: who defines what qualifies as climate finance, who controls financial institutions, and whose understanding of development determines the conditions attached to finance? Civil-society organisations can contribute monitoring and accountability, but their influence depends on access, expertise and institutional recognition.

5.2 Loss and Damage: Justice and Recognition

Loss and damage foregrounds the distributive and ethical dimensions of climate politics. Vulnerable states and communities argue that adaptation alone cannot address irreversible impacts. Rousseau's lens directs attention to a fair conception of collective responsibility. Hegel's lens draws attention to institutional mechanisms for recognition, compensation, support and coordination. Gramsci's lens asks whether the experiences of vulnerable communities can overcome dominant

narratives that treat climate impacts primarily as technical or humanitarian problems rather than questions of historical and structural justice.

5.3 Just Transition: Mediation between Climate and Development

The transition away from carbon-intensive systems creates opportunities but also distributional risks. Workers and communities may face job losses; consumers may experience changing energy costs; industries may face restructuring; governments may seek energy security; and environmental organisations may demand rapid decarbonisation. Hegel provides the strongest direct lens here because the problem is one of mediating particular interests. Rousseau adds the question of whether transition policy serves a broader social good. Gramsci highlights the struggle between competing narratives of transition and the possibility that powerful interests may shape which pathways are considered feasible.

5.4 Equity and CBDR-RC

The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities is central to the politics of climate equity. Rousseau's framework helps illuminate the tension between common responsibility and unequal circumstances. Hegel directs attention to the institutional negotiation through which differentiation is translated into rules and commitments. Gramsci invites scrutiny of the power relations through which some interpretations of responsibility gain greater legitimacy than others. The debate therefore involves not only legal and technical principles but also competing conceptions of justice and development.

6. Civil Society, SDG 13 and Sustainable Development

The 2030 Agenda presents the SDGs as integrated and indivisible. Climate action cannot therefore be separated from poverty, energy, employment, inequality, consumption, cities, institutions and partnerships. The three-thinker framework provides a political interpretation of this integration.

Rousseau and the SDGs

The SDGs can be read as an attempt to articulate a shared global agenda. The principle of leaving no one behind resonates with a conception of the common good, but the Rousseauian concern with inequality requires attention to unequal capacities and responsibilities.

Hegel and the SDGs

Sustainable development requires coordination among economic, social and environmental objectives. The relationship among SDG 7, SDG 8, SDG 10 and SDG 13 demonstrates the need for institutions capable of mediating tensions between energy, employment, inequality and climate action.

Gramsci and the SDGs

The term sustainable development has multiple interpretations. Green growth, technological modernisation, ecological transformation, climate justice and more radical alternatives compete for legitimacy. Civil society is a site in which these meanings are produced and contested.

7. India: An Illustrative Case

India is a particularly useful case because its international climate diplomacy is shaped by the simultaneous imperatives of development, poverty reduction, energy security, equity and global environmental responsibility. India's updated first NDC (2022) combines quantified mitigation objectives with a broader development context.

Through the Rousseauian lens, India challenges a conception of the global common good that treats all countries as identically situated. Its emphasis on equity and differentiated responsibilities raises the question of whether collective climate action can be legitimate without accounting for historical and developmental differences.

Through the Hegelian lens, India's position illustrates mediation among competing needs: rapid economic development, electricity access, industrialisation, employment, energy security and decarbonisation. Climate policy therefore requires institutions capable of reconciling these objectives rather than treating them as isolated sectors.

Through the Gramscian lens, India's diplomacy can be interpreted as participation in a struggle over the dominant narrative of development. Ideas concerning climate justice, sustainable lifestyles, equity and differentiated responsibility challenge the assumption that a single development pathway is universally appropriate. At the domestic level, however, civil society itself is plural and contested, including environmental movements, industry associations, researchers, local communities, farmers' organisations and youth groups.

India therefore demonstrates why international and domestic climate politics cannot be separated. International commitments acquire political meaning through domestic institutions, economic choices and public debate.

7.7 Karnataka-Specific Policy Recommendations

The Karnataka case suggests several refinements to the paper's broader recommendations. First, the state should strengthen district- and panchayat-level climate planning so that state targets are translated into locally differentiated adaptation and mitigation priorities. Second, climate information should be made accessible in locally useful forms, with stronger links among scientific institutions, extension systems and community organisations. Third, the implementation of the

KSAPCC should continue to develop transparent monitoring of outlays, outputs and outcomes, with public reporting and documented responses to citizen feedback.

Fourth, renewable-energy expansion should incorporate stronger social and procedural safeguards concerning land, livelihoods and local participation. Fifth, just-transition planning should be developed for workers, farmers and communities affected by changes in energy systems and land use. Sixth, Bengaluru and other rapidly urbanising areas require integrated climate governance linking water, transport, land use, heat, waste and public health rather than treating these as isolated sectoral problems. Seventh, universities and research institutions in Karnataka can serve as independent knowledge partners by conducting district-level climate assessments, evaluating policy outcomes and supporting public deliberation.

These measures would strengthen the movement from participation as consultation towards participation as co-production. They also demonstrate why the civil-society question cannot be separated from institutional design: participation becomes politically meaningful when it is connected to information, resources, representation, accountability and the capacity to affect decisions.

7.6 Applying the Common Good–Mediation–Hegemony Framework to Karnataka

The Karnataka case allows the framework to be operationalised at subnational level. First, the Common Good dimension asks what climate-resilient development should mean for Karnataka. A legitimate common good would need to combine ecological sustainability with livelihood security, energy access, food security, public health, social equity and intergenerational responsibility. It would also recognise that vulnerability differs across districts and social groups.

Second, the Mediation dimension maps the institutions through which conflicts are handled. Relevant actors include state departments, local governments, farmers, workers, industries, renewable-energy developers, utilities, research institutions and civil-society organisations. The central analytical question is not whether these actors have different interests—they clearly do—but whether institutions can reconcile those interests transparently and fairly.

Third, the Hegemony dimension examines the narratives that shape what policymakers and the public perceive as feasible. In Karnataka, examples include narratives of renewable energy as an engine of investment and development, urbanisation as a pathway to prosperity, technological modernisation as a solution to resource constraints, and climate resilience as primarily an infrastructure problem. Such narratives may be valuable, but they can become incomplete if they marginalise questions of distribution, participation and ecological limits.

The three dimensions together provide a practical research tool. A district climate initiative, renewable-energy project or urban adaptation programme can be evaluated by asking: What collective objective is being pursued? Which interests are affected and how are they mediated? Which actors and narratives have the greatest power to define the problem and the solution?

7.5 Civil Society, Local Institutions and Participatory Climate Governance

Karnataka's local-governance experience provides an important institutional context for climate participation. Gram sabhas, panchayats, farmer organisations, community groups, universities, NGOs and professional associations can connect state climate policy with local knowledge and lived experience. Research on participatory local governance in rural India has shown that the effectiveness of decentralised planning depends on the quality of local democratic practice and the inclusiveness of participation.

The KSAPCC monitoring architecture is significant because it explicitly includes a citizen-engagement and feedback component. This creates an institutional opening for moving from one-way disclosure towards a two-way climate-governance process in which citizens and civil-society organisations can comment on performance and propose improvements (Government of Karnataka, 2024a). Yet the existence of a feedback channel does not automatically establish influence. A Gramscian assessment would ask whether feedback changes priorities, budgets and implementation, or whether participation remains largely consultative.

For Karnataka, meaningful participation should therefore be assessed through observable institutional outcomes: whether local knowledge is incorporated into plans; whether vulnerable groups are represented; whether responses to feedback are publicly documented; whether climate spending and outcomes are accessible; and whether civil-society actors can participate before rather than after major policy decisions are made.

7.4 Urban Climate Governance and Bengaluru

Bengaluru illustrates the importance of subnational and metropolitan governance in climate politics. Rapid urbanisation, mobility demand, water stress, heat exposure, waste management and changing land use create interdependent policy challenges. These cannot be addressed by a single department or by climate policy treated as a separate environmental portfolio. They require coordination among municipal institutions, state agencies, transport bodies, utilities, researchers, businesses, resident groups and civil-society organisations.

The Bengaluru case also demonstrates the difference between consultation and effective participation. Civil-society organisations may produce data, mobilise citizens and challenge policy choices, but influence depends on access to decision-making institutions and on whether public authorities create mechanisms through which community knowledge can alter planning decisions. A Rousseauian perspective asks whether urban climate policy reflects a broadly shared public

interest; a Hegelian perspective examines the institutions that reconcile competing urban demands; and a Gramscian perspective examines whose definition of a modern, efficient and sustainable city becomes dominant.

7.3 Renewable Energy and the Politics of Transition

Karnataka has also become an important site for analysing renewable-energy governance. The Karnataka Renewable Energy Policy 2022–2027 seeks to deepen renewable-energy markets and promote solar, wind, hybrid systems, storage and other renewable technologies. The policy explicitly links renewable-energy expansion with energy security, investment, technological development and India's wider clean-energy objectives (Government of Karnataka, 2022).

The renewable-energy transition, however, should not be understood only as a technological shift. It creates questions of land, livelihoods, electricity access, local consent, grid infrastructure and the distribution of costs and benefits. These questions make the Gramscian dimension particularly relevant: different actors may promote competing narratives of what counts as a desirable energy future. The 2026 study of Karnataka's energy transition by Ranga, Srivastava and Bazaz highlights how regulatory disputes can expose institutional contradictions and how private renewable-energy developers and farmers become significant actors in electricity politics. This supports the argument that climate governance is shaped not only by formal targets but also by conflicts over rules, implementation and interpretation (Ranga et al., 2026).

A just-transition approach in Karnataka should therefore move beyond aggregate renewable-capacity targets. It should ask who gains access to new energy opportunities, who bears land and livelihood costs, how local communities participate in decisions, and whether workers and affected regions receive adequate support. The Hegelian emphasis on institutional mediation and the Gramscian emphasis on power complement the technological focus of energy policy.

7.2 Climate Vulnerability, Agriculture and Water

Climate variability in Karnataka is spatially differentiated. A recent regional assessment using long-term climatic data found differences among the North Interior, South Interior, Malnad and Coastal regions, including changing rainfall patterns, increasing temperature trends and heightened drought vulnerability in parts of the state (Reddy et al., 2024). Such variation matters politically because the effects of climate change are experienced through particular livelihoods and local institutions rather than as a uniform state-wide phenomenon.

Agriculture provides a clear example of the Hegelian problem of mediation. Farmers require reliable water, timely climate information, affordable inputs and market opportunities, while public agencies must balance agricultural production with groundwater sustainability and competing urban and industrial demands. Research in rural Karnataka has shown that access to

agricultural and climate-related knowledge is socially differentiated and that the usefulness of extension depends on accessibility and local relevance. The evidence from Kolar and Gulbarga demonstrates the importance of strengthening public field-level extension and community collectives rather than assuming that market-based information provision alone will resolve knowledge inequalities (Kumar et al., 2021).

Water governance intensifies these tensions. Karnataka's earlier State Action Plan identified groundwater depletion and the need for stronger institutional implementation of groundwater regulation as significant concerns. More recent state planning continues to treat water as a central climate-governance sector. From the perspective of the proposed framework, water is simultaneously a common good, a field of competing particular interests and a domain in which different actors possess unequal capacities to influence allocation and policy.

7.1 Karnataka as a Subnational Climate-Governance Case

Karnataka provides a particularly useful subnational extension of the India case because climate governance in the state combines rapid economic transformation, a large agricultural sector, urban expansion, renewable-energy development, water stress and exposure to droughts, floods and heat. The state's climate institutions therefore bring the three dimensions of the proposed framework into close contact: the common-good question concerns resilient and equitable development; the mediation question concerns conflicts among agriculture, urbanisation, energy, industry and ecological protection; and the hegemony question concerns which development narratives become authoritative in policy and public debate.

Karnataka's climate governance has moved beyond a purely environmental framing. The Karnataka State Action Plan on Climate Change (KSAPCC) 2024–2030 is presented as a multi-sectoral programme with particular attention to agriculture and water and is supported by a monitoring architecture intended to track departmental actions, resources, outputs and outcomes. The state's monitoring platform also explicitly provides for citizen engagement and civil-society feedback, making Karnataka a useful setting for examining the relationship between formal institutional mediation and participatory governance (Government of Karnataka, 2024a).

8. The Common Good–Mediation–Hegemony Framework

The paper proposes a three-dimensional framework for analysing civil society in climate governance. The dimensions are analytically distinct but empirically interconnected.

Dimension I: Common Good (Rousseau)

Identify the collective climate objective and examine whether it incorporates equity, intergenerational responsibility and the interests of vulnerable populations.

Dimension II: Mediation (Hegel)

Map the particular interests involved and analyse the institutions through which those interests are negotiated, reconciled, compensated or transformed.

Dimension III: Hegemony (Gramsci)

Identify which actors have greater capacity to define the terms of debate, normalise particular development pathways and establish their interpretation as common sense.

The framework can be applied to any climate-policy controversy. For example, in a coal phase-down debate, a researcher would first identify the collective climate and social objective; second, map workers, firms, governments, communities, consumers and environmental groups and the institutions mediating their interests; and third, examine the competing narratives that present coal as necessary, transitional, obsolete or unjust and identify which actors have the power to make one narrative dominant.

9. Findings and Discussion

- Civil society is neither uniformly progressive nor simply an extension of the state. It is internally differentiated and contains both emancipatory and conservative interests.
 - The Rousseauian lens reveals the legitimacy problem: collective climate action requires a conception of the common good that cannot ignore inequality and differentiated responsibility.
 - The Hegelian lens reveals the institutional problem: climate transformation produces real conflicts among economic and social interests that require mediation, compensation and institutional coordination.
 - The Gramscian lens reveals the power problem: climate policy is shaped by struggles over discourse, common sense and consent. Actors with greater material and communicative resources may have greater capacity to define feasible policy.
 - Climate finance, loss and damage, just transition and CBDR-RC demonstrate that climate negotiations are simultaneously normative, institutional and power-laden.
 - The SDGs provide a common normative framework, but their implementation remains contested. SDG 13 cannot be effectively pursued without coordination with poverty, energy, employment, inequality, consumption and institutional-governance goals.
 - India illustrates the importance of linking climate action to development and equity. Its climate diplomacy can be understood as an effort to reshape the meaning of the global climate common good while negotiating domestic developmental constraints.
 - Meaningful civil-society participation requires more than observer status. It requires access to information, resources, representation, accountability mechanisms and opportunities to influence agenda-setting.
-

10. Recommendations

1. Strengthen meaningful civil-society participation in climate negotiations through transparent consultation, accessible submissions and feedback mechanisms.
2. Improve representation of climate-vulnerable communities, Indigenous peoples, youth, women, workers and local communities in climate-policy processes.
3. Increase transparency and accountability in climate finance, including public information on commitments, allocation, conditions and outcomes.
4. Establish stronger just-transition institutions for workers and regions affected by decarbonisation, including reskilling, social protection and economic diversification.
5. Develop safeguards against conflicts of interest and disproportionate corporate influence while retaining constructive engagement with private-sector actors.
6. Strengthen climate literacy and public deliberation through universities, media, civil-society organisations and public institutions.
7. Integrate SDG implementation with national and subnational climate planning rather than treating SDG 13 as a separate environmental target.
8. Support systematic monitoring of climate discourse, including analysis of concepts such as net zero, green growth, transition, carbon neutrality and climate justice.
9. For India, institutionalise structured dialogue among government, research institutions, civil society, industry, workers and local communities in translating international climate commitments into domestic policy.
10. Move from consultation towards co-production wherever feasible, enabling civil society to participate in agenda-setting and policy evaluation rather than only commenting on completed proposals.
11. Promote an inclusive climate-governance model combining Rousseauian concern for common good, Hegelian institutional mediation and Gramscian sensitivity to unequal power.

11. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Rousseau, Hegel and Gramsci can be productively connected to contemporary climate governance through three concepts: common good, mediation and hegemony. Their theories should not be collapsed into a single conception of civil society; rather, their differences generate analytical depth.

Rousseau directs attention to the legitimacy of collective climate action. A global climate regime must articulate a common objective while recognising inequality and differentiated responsibility. Hegel draws attention to the institutional problem of reconciling particular interests. Climate transitions generate distributional conflicts that require social and political mediation. Gramsci



adds the critical dimension of power, showing that civil society is also a terrain where dominant narratives are produced and challenged.

Climate negotiations therefore involve more than bargaining among states. They are processes through which collective objectives are defined, competing interests are mediated and political meanings are contested. Civil society can contribute to all three processes, but its influence is structured by unequal access to resources, institutions and public discourse.

The paper's principal contribution is the Common Good–Mediation–Hegemony framework. It offers a bridge between political theory and climate politics and can be operationalised through empirical research on COP negotiations, civil-society submissions, climate-finance debates, just-transition policies and national climate diplomacy.

For India, the framework highlights the political significance of linking climate action with development, equity and energy security. It also creates space for analysing how domestic civil-society actors influence the translation of international commitments into national and subnational policy.

Ultimately, the central question is not simply whether civil society participates in climate governance. It is: ****Who defines the common climate good, how are competing interests mediated, and whose understanding of sustainable development becomes hegemonic?*** This question provides a theoretically grounded way of studying climate negotiations as a field of collective action, institutional mediation and political struggle.

References

- Arato, A., & Cohen, J. L. (1992). *Civil Society and Political Theory*. MIT Press.
- Bernstein, S. (2001). *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism*. Columbia University Press.
- Bulkeley, H., & Newell, P. (2015). *Governing Climate Change*. Routledge.
- Bulkeley, H., & Newell, P. (2015). *Governing climate change*. Routledge.
- Ciplet, D., Roberts, J. T., & Khan, M. R. (2015). *Power in a Warming World: The New Global Politics of Climate Change and the Remaking of Environmental Inequality*. MIT Press.
- Ciplet, D., Roberts, J. T., & Khan, M. R. (2015). *Power in a warming world: The new global politics of climate change and the remaking of environmental inequality*. MIT Press.
- Climate justice in India. (2023). Review and edited-volume scholarship on climate justice, social inequality, energy transition, water justice and social mobilisation in India. *Environmental Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2023.2216102>
- Cohen, J. L., & Arato, A. (1992). *Civil society and political theory*. MIT Press.
- Dey, K., & Gupta, K. B. (2026). Small wins through adaptation governance: Vulnerability, producer organizations, and climate-smart interventions. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 123, 104067. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2026.104067>
- Dryzek, J. S. (2013). *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2013). *The politics of the earth: Environmental discourses* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Dryzek, J. S., & Pickering, J. (2019). *The Politics of the Anthropocene*. Oxford University Press.
- Dryzek, J. S., & Pickering, J. (2019). *The politics of the Anthropocene*. Oxford University Press.
- Dubash, N. K. (Ed.). (2019). *India in a Warming World: Integrating Climate Change and Development*. Oxford University Press.
- Dubash, N. K. (Ed.). (2019). *India in a warming world: Integrating climate change and development*. Oxford University Press.
- Government of Karnataka. (2021). *Karnataka State Action Plan on Climate Change, Version 2.0*. Government of Karnataka, Forest Department.
- Government of Karnataka. (2021). *Karnataka State Disaster Management Plan: Climate change risk management and disaster-risk reduction provisions*. Karnataka State Disaster Management Authority.
-

-
- Government of Karnataka. (2022). Karnataka Renewable Energy Policy 2022–2027. Energy Department, Government of Karnataka.
- Government of Karnataka. (2024a). Karnataka State Action Plan on Climate Change (2024–2030): Monitoring and implementation framework. Government of Karnataka / EMPRI.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the prison notebooks (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.
- Habermas, J. (1989). The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1989). The structural transformation of the public sphere. MIT Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). Elements of the Philosophy of Right (A. W. Wood, Ed.; H. B. Nisbet, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1821).
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). Elements of the philosophy of right (A. W. Wood, Ed.; H. B. Nisbet, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1821).
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. IPCC.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. IPCC.
- Keane, J. (1988). Democracy and Civil Society. Verso.
- Kumar, S., et al. (2021). Understanding access to agrarian knowledge systems: Perspectives from rural Karnataka. Climate Services, 21, 100205. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cliser.2020.100205>
- Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. (2026). State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC) dashboard and state profiles. Government of India.
- Ministry of New and Renewable Energy. (2026). State renewable-energy policies: Karnataka Renewable Energy Policy 2022–2027. Government of India.
- National Water Mission. (2025). State Specific Action Plans (SSAP): Integrated water-resource management framework. Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India.
- Newell, P. (2000). Climate for Change: Non-State Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse. Cambridge University Press.
- Newell, P., & Paterson, M. (2010). Climate Capitalism: Global Warming and the Transformation of the Global Economy. Cambridge University Press.
-



Newell, P., & Paterson, M. (2010). Climate capitalism: Global warming and the transformation of the global economy. Cambridge University Press.

Paterson, M. (1996). Global Warming and Global Politics. Routledge.

Ranga, R., Srivastava, N., & Bazaz, A. (2026). From policy to petition: Disputes & discretion in regulating Karnataka's energy transition. The Electricity Journal. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tej.2026.107559>

Reddy, G. S. Srinivasa, Keerthy, N. G., Challa, O., Naidu, L. G. K., & Srinivasan Reddy. (2024). Assessment of climate change in different regions of Karnataka state. MAUSAM, 75(2), 333–348. <https://doi.org/10.54302/mausam.v75i2.5873>

Rousseau, J.-J. (1997). Discourse on the Origin of Inequality (V. Gourevitch, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1755).

Rousseau, J.-J. (1997). Discourse on the origin of inequality (V. Gourevitch, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1755).

Rousseau, J.-J. (1997). The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings (V. Gourevitch, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1762).

Rousseau, J.-J. (1997). The social contract and other later political writings (V. Gourevitch, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1762).

Schlosberg, D. (2007). Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature. Oxford University Press.

Schlosberg, D. (2007). Defining environmental justice: Theories, movements, and nature. Oxford University Press.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (1992). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (2015). Paris Agreement.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (2015). Paris Agreement. United Nations.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (2022). India's Updated First Nationally Determined Contribution.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (2024). The Role of Non-Party Stakeholders in Shaping the NDCs 3.0.



United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (2024). The role of non-Party stakeholders in shaping NDCs 3.0. UNFCCC.

United Nations. (2015). Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1.

United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1.

World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). Our Common Future. Oxford University Press.

World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). Our common future. Oxford University Press.

Young, I. M. (2000). Inclusion and Democracy. Oxford University Press.

Young, I. M. (2000). Inclusion and democracy. Oxford University Press.

Primary Documents

- UNFCCC Convention and official climate-process documents.
- Paris Agreement (2015), especially Articles 2, 4, 7, 9, 13 and 14.
- UNFCCC materials on non-Party stakeholders and observer participation.
- India's Updated First Nationally Determined Contribution (2022).
- United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015).
- IPCC Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report.
- Relevant COP decision texts and negotiated outcomes on climate finance, loss and damage, just transition and equity.